

Problems?

Part VI

By Michael Tucker

In recent months I have been invited by city councils to give demonstrations of dog training at their annual City Festivals. At the first event there were so many activities in progress that it was extremely difficult to capture the interest of the general public strolling around under the loud noise of everything. As usual most children wanted to queue up for all the fun things and various rides, and naturally they wanted their parents with them. Even though I was provided with a microphone, people were very slow to gather around. I gave two short but lively demonstrations to audiences of about 15 to 20 each time. I invited people to ask questions, but very few were forthcoming. Then the people moved away. Regrettably, there does not seem to be the same degree of interest shown by the general public today as there was many years ago. In the 'good old days' public events seemed to be organised in such a way that special demonstrations were well organised at set times. But now it seems to be one big free for all.

At the second festival a few of us from different training groups assembled to show people how dogs are trained and to promote responsible dog ownership. Sadly, the response was extremely poor. However, I met one young lady and her dog who had, like me, been invited to demonstrate. As you can imagine, attached to her belt was a bag containing food treats. It was not long before she offered one to me for my dog. Naturally, I declined her offer and explained that I would never reward my dog with food treats. Instead, I would reward with sincere praise. Thinking my remarks were rather odd and completely out of keeping with present day dog training methods, she asked me, "Why? What do you mean?" "It is quite simple," I replied, "dogs may well do anything for food treats, but not out of affection and respect they should have for their handlers." I said no more.

Later she recalled her dog in the ring we had erected. The dog came, but sat about two meters from her and completely out of line, looking at another dog a short distance away. She then dismissed her dog, walked over to it and attached her leash. Being curious, I asked her, "Were you really satisfied with the way your dog did that recall?" "No, not really" she answered, "that is why I never praised it. I only praise it when it comes in straight and sits straight in front of me." I was quite amazed to hear her explanation which clearly indicated to me that she lacked the knowledge in training principles, was inconsistent, and was not prepared to show her dog what it had to do, but instead hoped for best. When I suggested to her what she should do, she asked me to show her and handed the handle of her leash to me.

Quickly, I got acquainted with her dog then called it on the full length of the leash as I walked backwards across the ring, giving praise on every favourable response it made. Having commanded it to "Sit" I used both my hands and leash to mould the dog into the straight sit position. The dog attempted to move several times, but each time it did I quickly used my hands and leash to correct it. As soon as I got its attention, I praised it sincerely. In order to get its own way it tried various antics like jumping up, rolling over, standing up and twisting around. But it soon realised that I was the boss. Not only did I correct immediately and consistently, but I was also quick to praise it. Having

dismissed it, I carried out another recall. This one was most pleasing. It came straight, sat and never attempted to move as I gave prolonged praise and finally the dismissal.

I told the young lady how I had trained thousands of dogs in the same manner over several decades. In those few minutes she had seen with her own eyes how well her dog could perform if everything was taught correctly. She thanked me for helping her and said, "You certainly know what you are talking about. I have always wanted my dog to do a recall like that, but the instructors in my club won't have it any other way. The practise is that you only reward the dog when it comes straight and sits straight in front of you. If it does not, then you ignore it and hope for a better result next time". Two great results were achieved in that short lesson. Firstly, the dog soon learned who the boss was. The necessary corrections got the dog's respect, and when the praise was given it showed affection and attention. Secondly, the owner of the dog was very observant and quick to understand everything I explained and how I physically showed her dog with my hands what I required. The same hands were then used to praise the dog gently, slowly and for some time.

I only wished that there had been spectators present, for they too would have learned something. It had not been rehearsed — it was the real thing. I always believe in being positive and that opportunity, like many others, proved the point that if dogs are trained properly, their owners will be most proud of them. Hopefully, the handler will adopt what I showed her about the most important exercise in all forms of dog training —the recall, and show her dog club instructors and fellow handlers how well the procedure works without food treats. As I see it another problem exists in that people are too afraid to voice their own opinions even when, in their hearts, they know that some things are not right and need to be brought out into the open. Personally, I have never been afraid of giving my opinion on a wide range of subjects, not just training dogs. On rather a funny note a man telephoned me some weeks ago about all my articles in this magazine which he enjoyed reading. Certain that I was being paid for my work; he was most surprised when I told him that I was doing it for nothing. I informed him that I had written monthly on the kind invitation of the Victorian Canine Association, and that I like writing in order to help others and share with them my knowledge and experience— a labour of love you might say. He kindly encouraged me to keep writing.

Last year I was instructing a group class in a six week basic obedience dog training course. I never use my own dog with which to demonstrate. Instead, I ask if I may borrow a dog to demonstrate a particular exercise. There is never a lack of offers. But in fairness, I try to use a different dog each time. Therefore, all the dogs get to know me very well and show respect. Now there was one particular new dog which showed a distinct concentration on my spare hand when I led it away from its owner. I could tell immediately that it had been taught with food treats, but I said nothing at the time. I got on with what I was showing the class. Finally, I thanked the lady for kindly loaning her dog to me and returned it to her. As I did this, I said, "I can tell that you have been training your dog with food treats." Her facial expression was one of amazement, as if to convey, 'How on earth do you know'. She admitted that she had only used treats once or twice, to which I replied, "No, not once or twice, but many times. I can tell by the way your dog was looking at my hand, but when it realised I didn't carry food, it didn't bother about looking at my hand any more. Dogs can't talk, but they can certainly show you, can't they. Of course, what we have to do is to read our dogs. Admittedly, that does take years of experience." Anyway, we all had a good laugh about it.

Well, my readers, I feel sure you will be able to see, once again, how problems can arise in dog training, but also how they can be prevented by thinking everything out very carefully and from time to time RE-THINK about what you are doing. Next month I intend to write about how dogs can

become physically stressed as well as mentally stressed. Naturally, I will give advice on how to prevent these problems. Till then, enjoy your dogs and keep them out of the severe sun.